



Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission

Safe-Guarding the People of Nagorno-Karabakh

Wednesday, June 21, 2023

2:15 – 4:00 p.m.

2360 Rayburn House Office Building

As prepared for delivery

Good afternoon. I join Co-Chair Smith in welcoming you to today's Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission hearing on civilian protection in Nagorno-Karabakh.

We are here today because there is growing fear among Armenians who live in Nagorno-Karabakh that they are in danger.

Given the history of the Armenian people, no one should be surprised there is fear.

It was only two years ago that President Biden officially recognized the Armenian genocide of 1915 to 1917, during which one and a half million Armenians were deported, massacred or marched to their deaths in a campaign of extermination by the Ottoman authorities.

Those atrocities were committed more than a hundred years ago, but for many Armenians it feels like yesterday.

That is the context in which recent actions taken by the government of Azerbaijan are being experienced and interpreted.

Azerbaijan is not Türkiye, but it is a close ally of Türkiye, the successor to the Ottoman empire. People fear the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, the longest running in post-Soviet Eurasia, could fuel a repeat of the past.

It is important to remember how we got here.

In 1988, ethnic Armenians living in Nagorno-Karabakh demanded the transfer of what was then the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast from Soviet Azerbaijan to Armenia. As the Soviet Union collapsed, tensions grew into an outright war.

When fighting ceased in 1994, Nagorno-Karabakh and seven adjacent districts were wholly or partially controlled by Armenian forces. More than a million people had been forced from their homes: Azerbaijanis fled Armenia, Nagorno-Karabakh and the adjacent territories, while Armenians left homes in Azerbaijan.

From 1994 until 2020, intermittent deadly incidents demonstrated the ever-present risk that war would reignite. In April 2016, four days of intense fighting at the line of separation killed hundreds on both sides.

Full-fledged war resumed on September 27, 2020. Six weeks of bloody armed conflict finally ended on November 10th with a Russian-brokered ceasefire.

Under the agreement, Azerbaijan fully controls the seven districts adjacent to Nagorno-Karabakh that Armenian forces had held since the previous war. It also holds a substantial part of Nagorno-Karabakh itself. The rest is patrolled by a Russian peacekeeping force but still governed by self-proclaimed local authorities.

During the 2020 war, some 90,000 residents of Nagorno-Karabakh were forcibly displaced. Today, more than 40,000 are still displaced.

Before the 2020 war, the Armenian population of Nagorno-Karabakh was about 147,000. Today it is estimated to be down to 120,000.

Forced displacement can be a tactic used to achieve ethnic cleansing. That's not always the case, but it is sometimes the case.

Since the end of the war, a lot has happened.

In the territories Azerbaijan reclaimed, the government has gradually begun to resettle Azeris who were displaced in the 1990s.

It has also taken control of more territory, some in keeping with the cease-fire agreement, some illegally occupied.

In September 2022, Azerbaijani forces launched cross-border attacks in which 200 Armenians were killed or went missing, and 80 Azerbaijanis were killed.

And then in December 2022, Azerbaijan began asserting control over the Lachin corridor that connects Nagorno-Karabakh to Armenia.

First, a group of activists blocked civilian and commercial traffic on the corridor, leaving thousands of Armenians without access to essential goods, including food and medicines.

The Azeri government denied that the activists had its backing, but the International Court of Justice didn't buy that when this February it ordered Azerbaijan to "take all measures at its disposal to ensure unimpeded movement of persons, vehicles and cargo along the Lachin Corridor in both directions."

Then in April, Azerbaijan established an official border checkpoint that means local Armenian residents cannot transit to and from Nagorno-Karabakh.

The Azerbaijani community wants to talk about Azeri sovereignty, since Nagorno-Karabakh is internationally recognized as part of Azerbaijan.

But the bottom line is that the Armenian population in Nagorno-Karabakh understandably feels vulnerable and at risk.

So, what do we do about this? What is the pro-human rights response here? It is to ensure civilian protection, which means taking any and all actions we can to prevent further escalation of tensions that could lead to more war and new atrocities.

I am happy to say that many of us in Congress have already been paying attention.

I am proud to be an original cosponsor of House Res. 108, a bipartisan resolution introduced by Congressmen Frank Pallone and Gus Bilirakis in February, which condemns the blockade and makes recommendations I am sure will be echoed today. They include full enforcement of section 907 of the FREEDOM Support Act. I encourage my colleagues on both sides of the aisle to cosponsor this resolution.

I also think it's important to recognize that the U.S. government has long supported and facilitated peace talks to resolve the Azerbaijan-Armenia conflict, including through the Minsk Group created in 1992. Multilateral efforts continue, and the Biden Administration just hosted both foreign ministers for several days of negotiations last month. Although I might wish for greater transparency about the proposals under discussion – a difficult thing to do during sensitive negotiations – I strongly support these peace efforts, because everyone knows a political agreement is the only feasible path forward for this entrenched dispute -- and the only alternative to more war. I look forward to your recommendations as to how to increase the chances of success.

I yield back.